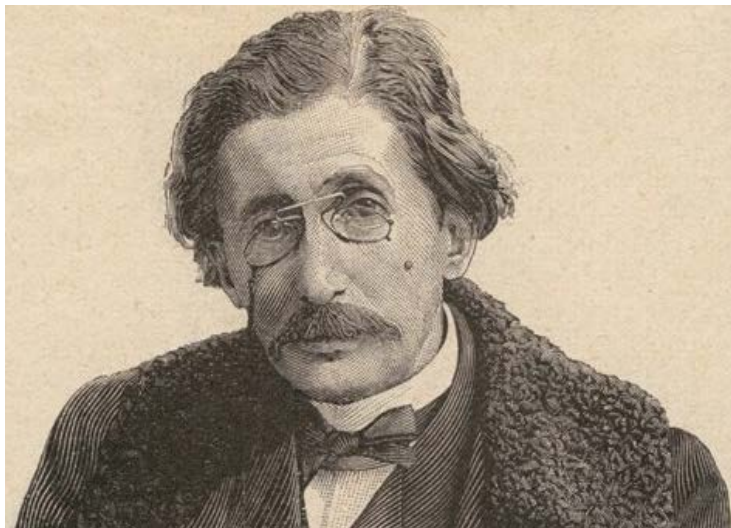


INTRODUCTION

GABRIEL TARDE: A REAPPRAISAL OF HIS CONTRIBUTIONS TO SOCIOLOGY

Kostas THEOLOGOU



**French sociologist and social theorist
Gabriel Tarde**

Photo: Eugène Pirou/Bibliothèque interuniversitaire de santé), available at: <https://editoraunesp.com.br/blog/classicos-do-catalogo-monadologia-e-sociologia-de-gabriel-tarde> (accessed on June 10, 2025)

Gabriel Tarde (1843-1904) was a pivotal yet often underappreciated figure in nineteenth-century French sociology. Positioned alongside contemporaries such as Auguste Comte, Frédéric Le Play, and Émile Durkheim, Tarde distinguished himself through his empirical rigor and theoretical originality. While Comte emphasized positivism and Durkheim the primacy of social facts, Tarde foregrounded the significance of individual psychological processes and micro-level interactions as foundational to social life.^{1, 2}

Tarde's marginalization within the French intellectual establishment was partly due to his provincial career, which kept him away from the academic and political centers of Paris. Moreover, his moderate religious views and political detachment rendered him an outlier in an age marked by ideological extremism.³ Despite this, his criminological work gained considerable recognition, particularly for its critique of the biological determinism espoused by Cesare Lombroso and the Italian school of criminology.^{4, 5}

His major theoretical contributions are encapsulated in three works: *Les lois de l'imitation* (1890), *La logique sociale* (1895), and *L'opposition universelle* (1897). These texts articulate a general theory of society grounded in three interrelated processes: invention, imitation, and opposition. Tarde proposed that social innovation originates in individual creativity (invention), proliferates through replication (imitation), and is modulated by resistance or conflict (opposition), offering a dynamic framework for understanding cultural transmission and social change.⁶

- 1 Clark, T. N. (Ed.). (1969). *Gabriel Tarde on communication and social influence*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- 2 Katz, E. (2006). *Theorizing diffusion: Tarde and Sorokin revisited*. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 608(1), 144-155. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716206292341>
- 3 Deflem, M. (2005). *The reception of Michel Foucault in American sociology, 1977–2004*. *The British Journal of Sociology*, 56(4), 678–701. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-4446.2005.00085>
- 4 Tarde, G. (1886). *La criminalité comparée*. Félix Alcan.
- 5 Tarde, G. (1890). *Les lois de l'imitation*. Félix Alcan.
- 6 Rogers, E. M. (1962). *Diffusion of innovations*. Free Press.

Introduction and biographical background

Gabriel Tarde occupies a significant yet often overlooked position within the canon of classical sociology. Alongside figures such as Auguste Comte, Frédéric Le Play, and Émile Durkheim, Tarde contributed profoundly to the development of sociological theory in nineteenth-century France. However, unlike his more widely recognized contemporaries, Tarde has remained relatively marginalized in the sociological discourse. This marginalization can be attributed to several factors, including his geographical and institutional detachment from Parisian academic circles and his ideological nonalignment with dominant currents of the time.⁷

Born in Sarlat, a secluded town in southwestern France, Tarde was the only child of a noble family with deep regional roots dating back to the Middle Ages. His father, a judge, died during Tarde's early childhood, leaving him to be raised by a devoted and sensitive mother. Tarde's early education took place in a Jesuit institution, where he received a strict classical training. Reflecting on this experience, Tarde later argued that classical education plays an essential integrative role for elite groups, fostering a common cultural framework necessary for national cohesion.⁸ Although he initially aspired to study mathematics and science at the prestigious École Polytechnique, an eye disease forced him to alter his plans. Tarde subsequently pursued legal studies, enrolling first at the University of Toulouse and later completing his final year in Paris. Upon obtaining his degree, he returned to Sarlat and embarked on a legal career as a magistrate. From 1869 to 1894, he served in various judicial capacities within the region. His decision to remain in the provinces –motivated by filial loyalty and personal preference–undoubtedly limited his visibility within the Parisian intellectual milieu but allowed him the time and financial security to develop his theoretical system.⁹

Tarde's intellectual influences were eclectic, encompassing the rationalism of Leibniz and Hegel, the probabilistic thought of Cournot, and the evolutionary sociology of Herbert Spencer. By 1875, he had formulated the foundational outlines of his social theory, although he delayed publication for nearly a decade.¹⁰

From Criminology to Sociological Theory

Tarde initially gained recognition not as a sociologist but as a criminologist. His early works, including *La criminalité comparée* (1886) and *La philosophie pénale* (1890), were widely praised and established him as a leading figure in French criminology.¹¹ During this period, he published numerous shorter essays on criminal behavior and penal theory, and in 1893 he became co-director of the *Archives d'Anthropologie Criminelle*, a prominent interdisciplinary journal in the field. His approach to criminology was shaped by his extensive practical experience as a magistrate, where he routinely dealt with recurring patterns of criminal behavior. This led him to develop a theoretical orientation in which the concept of imitation played a central role. For Tarde, the recurrence of similar crimes pointed to the significance of social influence over biological determinism –a viewpoint directly opposed to the theories of Cesare Lombroso and the Italian school, who emphasized physiological and racial predispositions to crime.^{12, 13, 14}

Tarde's opposition to deterministic biology is evident in his argument that criminality, though

7 Clark, T. N. (Ed.). (1969). *Gabriel Tarde on communication and social influence*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, p. 360.

8 Ibid., p. 361.

9 Ibid., pp. 362-363.

10 Ibid., p. 363.

11 Ibid., p. 364.

12 Tarde, G. (1886). *La criminalité comparée*. Félix Alcan.

13 Tarde, G. (1890). *Les lois de l'imitation*. Félix Alcan.

14 Clark, T. N. (Ed.). (1969). *Gabriel Tarde on communication and social influence*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, pp. 365-366.

it may exhibit hereditary components, is primarily a social phenomenon governed by broader societal laws. As director of criminal statistics at the Ministry of Justice following his mother's death in 1894, Tarde examined national crime data and found that virtually all categories of crime had increased steadily since the early 19th century. He interpreted this trend not as evidence of moral decline, but rather as a demonstration of his theory of imitation, particularly its geometric progression.¹⁵

Despite his emphasis on social causation, Tarde rejected the Durkheimian notion that crime is a "normal" and even necessary feature of social life. He regarded such views as morally untenable, insisting that responsibility for criminal behavior must rest with the individual (Clark, 1968: 367).¹⁶ His early endorsement of severe punitive measures, including capital punishment and transportation to penal colonies, gave way to a more nuanced position as he came to recognize the ineffectiveness of such sanctions in curbing criminal activity.

After 1890, Tarde increasingly turned from criminology to broader sociological and philosophical concerns. His theoretical magnum opus unfolded across three major works: *Les lois de l'imitation* (1890), *La logique sociale* (1895), and *L'opposition universelle* (1897). These texts laid the foundation for a general sociology that emphasized the psychological mechanisms underlying social processes—especially the dynamics of invention, imitation, and opposition.¹⁷ Tarde's later academic roles reflected the growing importance of his sociological work. After 1896, he lectured at the École Libre des Sciences Politiques and the Collège Libre des Sciences Sociales. In 1900, he was appointed to the chair of modern philosophy at the Collège de France and was subsequently elected to the Académie des Sciences Morales et Politiques.¹⁸ These appointments, however, came relatively late in life and did little to elevate his status above that of Durkheim, whose institutional influence far surpassed his own.

Tarde's General Theory: Invention, Imitation, and Opposition

At the heart of Gabriel Tarde's sociological thought lies a psychological theory of social interaction that centers on three interrelated processes: invention, imitation, and opposition. These concepts constitute the foundation of his general theory of society, most systematically articulated in his trilogy: *Les lois de l'imitation* (1890), *La logique sociale* (1895), and *L'opposition universelle* (1897). According to Tarde, society is not a sui generis entity as Durkheim maintained, but rather the cumulative result of individual interactions shaped by psychological forces.¹⁹

Tarde's point of departure is what he termed "intermental activity"—the dynamic interplay of beliefs and desires among individuals. In this framework, human personality evolves through the continual psychological negotiation between internal cognitive and affective materials. This psychologicistic orientation marked a stark departure from the Durkheimian emphasis on collective representations and structural determinism.²⁰

INVENTION

For Tarde, all social innovation originates from invention, which he defines as novel combinations of existing ideas generated within individual minds. Drawing inspiration from Darwinian adaptation, he regarded invention as a human counterpart to biological mutation: a creative mechanism through which individuals respond to environmental challenges.^{21, 22} However,

15 Ibid., p. 367.

16 Ibid., p. 367.

17 Ibid., p. 368.

18 Ibid., p. 369.

19 Ibid., p. 369.

20 Ibid., p. 370.

21 Tarde, G. (1890). *Les lois de l'imitation*. Félix Alcan.

22 Clark, T. N. (Ed.). (1969). *Gabriel Tarde on communication and social influence*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, p. 371.

he also posited limits to human creativity, arguing –based on Francis Galton's studies in *Hereditary Genius*– that a society 's collective capacity for innovation is constrained by the cognitive abilities of its members. In general, a more populous society, by increasing the number of interpersonal interactions, enhances the likelihood of inventive breakthroughs (Clark, 1968: 371).²³

IMITATION

The process of imitation is central to Tarde's explanation of social continuity and change. Although countless inventions are produced, only a few attain wide acceptance. Tarde thus directed analytical attention to the mechanisms that govern the diffusion of innovations. He observed that imitations tend to follow a geometric progression, spreading from their point of origin outward in concentric circles, analogous to ripples on a pond.^{24, 25} Importantly, this diffusion is subject to environmental "refraction", a metaphor borrowed from physics to describe how material, biological, and above all social contexts shape the trajectory of imitation. Tarde distinguished between logical and extralogical factors influencing imitation. Logical factors include consistency with existing cultural systems –for example, a new technology is more likely to be adopted if it aligns with prevailing technological capacities.²⁶

Tarde identified three principal extralogical factors. First, imitation typically proceeds from affect to cognition to behavior. That is, people tend to adopt ideas or practices initially through emotional resonance, followed by intellectual acceptance, and finally behavioral conformity. Second, the prestige hierarchy determines imitation's directionality: innovations from socially superior actors are more likely to be imitated than those from inferiors. Third, receptivity to innovation varies cyclically; sometimes societies prefer traditional, proven elements, while at other times they gravitate toward novelty and the avant-garde. This fluctuation affects all societal domains –language, religion, economy, politics, and the arts (Clark, 1968: 373-374).²⁷

OPPOSITION

In *L'opposition universelle* (1897), Tarde extended his theoretical system by incorporating the concept of opposition. He argued that conflict, whether physical, biological, psychological, or social, is a necessary counterbalance to imitation and invention. Physical conflict pertains to energy and motion; biological conflict relates to species evolution; and psychological conflict –the internal clash of contradictory ideas or desires– serves as a fertile ground for creativity.^{28, 29}

Social opposition arises when competing innovations meet and interact. The intensity of such conflict varies across institutional realms. Tarde suggested that while moral disagreements tend to be diffuse and personal, economic conflicts are more structured, and political conflicts, particularly international ones, are the most intense and consequential. The greater the societal adjustment required by an innovation, the more intense the opposition it provokes.³⁰

This triadic framework –encompassing invention, imitation, and opposition – enables a dynamic view of society as a field of psychological interactions, subject to patterns of diffusion and disruption. Tarde's theory thus provides an early precursor to modern studies of cultural transmission, social movements, and innovation systems.

23 Ibid., p. 371.

24 Tarde, G. (1890). *Les lois de l'imitation*. Félix Alcan.

25 Clark, T. N. (Ed.). (1969). *Gabriel Tarde on communication and social influence*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, p. 372.

26 Ibid., p. 373.

27 Ibid., pp. 373-374.

28 Tarde, G. (1897). *L'opposition universelle: Essai d'une théorie des contraires*. Félix Alcan.

29 Clark, T. N. (Ed.). (1969). *Gabriel Tarde on communication and social influence*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, p. 375.

30 Ibid., pp. 376-377.

Empirical methodology and measurement in Tarde's work

Unlike many of his contemporaries who were primarily engaged in speculative system-building, Gabriel Tarde consistently sought empirical validation for his theoretical constructs. Although constrained by the limitations of data collection technologies of his time, he attempted to develop methods for the operationalization and measurement of the core processes in his social theory –namely, invention, imitation, and opposition.³¹

Tarde recognized the inherent difficulties in scientifically analyzing invention, which he viewed as a psychological and inherently individualized process. He believed that invention could only be studied indirectly –primarily through historical or archaeological analysis of the socio-cultural contexts in which new ideas emerged.³² For instance, the discovery of tools or texts from ancient civilizations could, in his view, provide partial insight into the mental configurations that enabled early innovations. In contrast, the phenomena of imitation and opposition were more amenable to empirical study, particularly through statistical methods. Tarde's appointment as director of criminal statistics at the Ministry of Justice afforded him access to large datasets, which he used to trace patterns of social behavior. He favored time-series analysis over cross-sectional studies, arguing that temporal progression reveals more about the mechanisms of diffusion than static breakdowns by region, gender, or occupation. For Tarde, the spread of innovations through socially homogeneous environments should, in the absence of opposition, follow a geometric progression –a model that could be empirically tested. Deviations from this expected pattern signaled the presence of “refraction” or resistance from alternative innovations or systemic obstacles.³³

Tarde was sharply critical of the deficiencies in governmental statistical reporting. He lamented the paucity of reliable quantitative indicators for key cultural variables such as moral values, religious participation, scientific output, and linguistic transformation. He maintained that these were far more important for social analysis than the conventional statistics available at the time, which focused on demography, commerce, and crime.³⁴

One of Tarde's most prescient insights concerns the measurement of public opinion. Although writing decades before the advent of modern survey techniques, he anticipated many of their essential features. In *Les lois de l'imitation*, he remarked: “*Psychological statistics alone, recording the rise and fall of an individual's particular beliefs and desires, would give, if they were practically possible, the deeper meanings behind figures provided by ordinary statistics*”.^{35, 36} In the absence of such refined tools, he suggested using behavioral proxies –such as church attendance, charitable donations, book sales, newspaper circulation, and electoral patterns– as rough indicators of prevailing beliefs and desires. Tarde even envisioned the creation of a device that could quantitatively assess what he called the “psychic raw materials” of belief and desire. Such a device, he proposed, would aggregate individual attitudes into a measure of public opinion –a remarkable conceptual anticipation of modern attitude surveys and public opinion polling.³⁷

Despite the limitations of the empirical resources available to him, Tarde's methodological orientation remains notable for its emphasis on psychological depth and historical dynamism. His ambition to unify theoretical abstraction with empirical specificity continues to resonate with contemporary scholars of social theory and methodology.

31 Ibid., p. 378.

32 Ibid., p. 379.

33 Ibid., p. 379.

34 Ibid., p. 380.

35 Tarde, G. (1890). *Les lois de l'imitation*. Félix Alcan, p. 115.

36 Clark, T. N. (Ed.). (1969). *Gabriel Tarde on communication and social influence*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, p. 380.

37 Ibid., p. 381.

Substantive contributions

MASS COMMUNICATION AND PERSONAL INFLUENCE

Gabriel Tarde was one of the earliest theorists to recognize the sociological importance of emerging modes of communication in the modern industrial society. His reflections on the telegraph, telephone, printed invitations, and most notably the mass-circulation newspaper positioned him as a foundational thinker in the sociology of mass media.³⁸ He understood that such technologies were not merely tools for transmitting information but transformative agents that reshaped patterns of social integration, cultural diffusion, and public consciousness.

Tarde argued that before the printing press, communication and social control were exercised largely within local, traditional groups such as families, villages, and occupational guilds. The development of the newspaper, however, enabled the formation of “publics” –aggregates of dispersed individuals who, exposed to the same messages, developed a shared self-consciousness. In this way, newspapers facilitated the emergence of secondary associations, including political parties, national professional organizations, and modern religious institutions.³⁹

He perceived two primary effects of mass communication. First, newspapers functioned as integrative mechanisms that extended loyalties beyond parochial affiliations to national and international domains. Second, they acted as civilizing and rationalizing forces, fostering broader and more abstract forms of social coordination (Clark, 1968: 383).⁴⁰

Tarde's view of communication as a two-level process was especially prescient. In *L'opinion et la foule* (1901), he famously remarked, “If people did not talk, it would be futile to publish newspapers ... they would exercise no durable or profound influence; they would be like a vibrating string without a sounding board”.^{41, 42} This metaphor anticipates what communication theorists Katz and Lazarsfeld would later formalize as the “two-step flow of communication”, wherein mass media exert influence through interpersonal channels and opinion leaders who mediate and adapt messages for specific audiences.⁴³

Tarde's principle of imitation undergirds this model of personal influence. Innovations –whether ideas or behaviors– originating through mass media are disseminated via interpersonal networks, with diffusion typically proceeding from individuals of higher to lower social prestige. Thus, social hierarchies and informal leaders play a critical role in shaping how media messages are interpreted and acted upon.⁴⁴

These insights remain highly relevant today in an age dominated by digital media, where similar dynamics of elite influence, networked diffusion, and affective reception persist. Tarde's work anticipates much of contemporary research in media sociology, opinion formation, and political communication.

POLITICAL SOCIOLOGY

Gabriel Tarde's reflections on political structures and processes, particularly in *Les transformations du pouvoir* (1899), constitute a significant yet underexplored contribution to the early development of political sociology. Tarde viewed political institutions not as autonomous entities, but as derivative expressions of broader societal patterns shaped by interaction,

38 Ibid., p. 382.

39 Ibid., pp. 382-383.

40 Ibid., p. 383.

41 Tarde, G. (1901). *L'opinion et la foule*. Félix Alcan, p. 83.

42 Clark, T. N. (Ed.). (1969). *Gabriel Tarde on communication and social influence*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, p. 384.

43 Katz, E. & Lazarsfeld, P. F. (1955). *Personal influence: The part played by people in the flow of mass communications*. Free Press.

44 Clark, T. N. (Ed.). (1969). *Gabriel Tarde on communication and social influence*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, p. 384.

imitation, and innovation. For him, power arose from collective norms formed through social interaction, rather than existing as a separate domain governed by its own sui generis logic, as was suggested by thinkers like Durkheim.⁴⁵

Tarde asserted that political innovation, like technological or cultural change, originated with elite groups that held specialized knowledge and performed unique societal functions. Political change thus required not only the presence of original ideas but also the active dissemination of those ideas by influential actors. These elites –military, economic, religious, or aesthetic– served as conduits for introducing new political forms into broader society.⁴⁶ He further argued that the mechanisms governing political diffusion adhered to the same spatial and hierarchical patterns as other social innovations. Political ideas typically radiate from urban centers to rural peripheries, and from powerful or prestigious nations to those with lesser status. For instance, the liberal and democratic ideologies of the eighteenth-century diffused outward from France and England, influencing political movements across Europe and beyond.⁴⁷

Crucially, Tarde recognized the role of mass communication and transportation in accelerating political change. Improved communication technologies and the expansion of mass publics –especially through newspapers– created new conditions for the formation of national political parties, the organization of public opinion, and the consolidation of political ideologies. These overlapping publics, he noted, facilitated the smoother transmission of innovations and reduced the resistance typically associated with political transformation.⁴⁸

Nevertheless, Tarde remained attentive to the inevitability of conflict in the political realm. The introduction of new political ideas often leads to opposition and social struggle, particularly when these ideas threaten entrenched interests or require substantial institutional reconfigurations. While he maintained that conflict is a natural and necessary part of political evolution, Tarde believed that the expanding scope of shared communication would, over time, promote greater consensus and political integration (Clark, 1968: 386-387).⁴⁹ In many respects, Tarde's approach anticipates later developments in political sociology that emphasize the role of elite circulation, media influence, and cultural diffusion in shaping political life. His insistence on grounding political phenomena in general social processes marked an important departure from more rigid institutional or structural-functional analyses.

THE SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY OF ECONOMICS

Gabriel Tarde's economic thought, principally articulated in his two-volume *Psychologie économique* (1902), represents an original attempt to construct a sociologically and psychologically informed account of economic behavior. In contrast to classical economists who treated market activity as rational and autonomous, Tarde situated economic phenomena within a broader matrix of social interaction, symbolic communication, and cultural values.⁵⁰ His analysis anticipated major themes in later economic sociology, including the social construction of markets, the cultural underpinnings of value, and the importance of trust and affect in exchange relations.

One of Tarde's central arguments was that economic processes such as price formation, investment decisions, and market coordination depend not merely on supply and demand, but on a set of collective understandings and shared cultural assumptions. For these social conventions to develop, he argued, individuals must possess sufficient leisure time, which allows for informal social interaction –the primary medium through which values are gen-

45 Ibid., p. 385.

46 Ibid., p. 385.

47 Ibid., p.p. 385-386.

48 Ibid., p. 386.

49 Ibid., pp. 386-387.

50 Ibid., p. 388.

erated and transmitted.⁵¹ Tarde thus linked economic innovation to social stratification and leisure inequality. He contended that creative economic developments typically emerge from elite groups with greater leisure time and social capital, which afford them the opportunity to engage in reflective thought and experimentation. In this sense, economic progress is analogous to other forms of invention in Tarde's theory and is likewise diffused through imitation.⁵² He warned that excessive equalization of leisure across society could potentially weaken a nation's creative and adaptive capacity, although he acknowledged exceptions to this rule – citing the case of the United States, where relatively broad access to education and mobility seemed to sustain a high level of innovation⁵³

Another of Tarde's significant insights was his understanding of labor unions and collective bargaining as extensions of the expanding "publics" made possible by modern communication. While acknowledging that unions could increase short-term conflict between labor and capital, he foresaw their potential to integrate workers into broader networks of public discourse and institutional negotiation. This integrative function, he believed, would ultimately lead to greater social harmony, as diverse social actors became linked through shared communicative practices and values.⁵⁴ In sum, Tarde's economic sociology was grounded in a theory of interaction and diffusion. Markets, prices, and consumption patterns were not, for him, reducible to impersonal mechanisms or mathematical models; rather, they were dynamic outcomes of interpersonal imitation, elite influence, and fluctuating social desires. This view positioned him well ahead of his time, anticipating the behavioral and cultural turns in both economics and sociology.

CRIMINOLOGY AND PENOLOGY

Tarde's earliest academic reputation was built on his contributions to criminology and penology, which preceded the full articulation of his sociological theory. His foundational texts – *La criminalité comparée* (1886) and *La philosophie pénale* (1890) – as well as his extensive editorial and statistical work with the French Ministry of Justice, positioned him as one of the most influential criminologists of his time.⁵⁵

Tarde's criminological work developed in deliberate opposition to the biologically reductionist theories popularized by Cesare Lombroso and the Italian school of criminal anthropology. While Tarde acknowledged in his early writings that heredity and racial factors could predispose individuals toward criminal behavior, he ultimately came to reject any deterministic framework that treated crime as a purely biological phenomenon.⁵⁶ Instead, he maintained that criminality was fundamentally a social phenomenon, explicable by the same mechanisms – particularly imitation – that governed all human behavior.

As director of criminal statistics at the Ministry of Justice, Tarde had access to longitudinal data showing a steady increase in virtually all categories of crime since the early 19th century. He interpreted this not as evidence of moral decay or social collapse, but as a demonstration of his theory that social behaviors, including criminal acts, spread through imitation in geometric progression. Unlike Durkheim, who argued that crime was a "normal" and even functional element of society, Tarde viewed this assertion as morally irresponsible. He held that criminal behavior, while socially patterned, could never be fully excused or normalized. Responsibility, he insisted, must remain with the individual perpetrator. This emphasis on individual agency distinguished Tarde's theory from more structuralist or deterministic approaches and underscored his broader psychological orientation.⁵⁷

51 Ibid., p. 388.

52 Ibid., pp. 388-389.

53 Ibid., p. 389.

54 Ibid., p. 389.

55 Ibid., p. 390.

56 Ibid., pp. 390-391.

57 Ibid., p. 391.

Tarde's views on penal policy evolved significantly over time. Early in his career, he supported harsh penalties including capital punishment and transportation to penal colonies. However, as he examined the statistical evidence more closely, he concluded that there was virtually no correlation between the severity of punishments and actual crime rates. This led him to adopt a more reform-oriented stance, emphasizing preventive and rehabilitative approaches over retributive justice.⁵⁸

Although Tarde's later writings focused primarily on sociological and philosophical questions, his criminological ideas have had lasting influence. He was among the first to formulate a sociologically grounded theory of criminal behavior that emphasized psychological mechanisms, cultural transmission, and social context. His emphasis on the spread of criminal behavior through social learning paved the way for later developments in criminology, including differential association theory and subcultural theories of deviance. Even decades after his death, criminologists such as Davidovitch (1963)⁵⁹ continued to cite Tarde's work as a foundational source of hypotheses and insights, particularly regarding the diffusion of delinquent behavior and the social construction of criminal norms. Tarde's work thus continues to resonate in contemporary criminological theory, especially in the context of efforts to understand crime as a socially embedded and culturally mediated phenomenon.

Assessment and legacy

Early critiques of Gabriel Tarde's work predominantly centered on ontological objections. Critics mainly challenged his foundational assumption that society constitutes merely an aggregate of individuals, in contrast to Émile Durkheim's conception of society as a *sui generis* reality. During Tarde's intellectual milieu, particularly in France, the dominant preoccupation among social scientists lay in ontological debates rather than the development of a systematic science of human behavior.

Contemporary scholarship tends to prioritize an examination of Tarde's empirical sociological contributions over his broader philosophical stance on social science. From this vantage point, a notable limitation in Tarde's oeuvre is his recurrent tendency to rationalize contradictory or problematic data through tenuous interpretations that favor his theoretical framework—a strategy arguably facilitated by his accessible literary style. Such an approach often shielded him from critically reassessing the adequacy of his conceptual formulations. Moreover, like many intellectuals of his era, Tarde uncritically embraced prevailing notions of evolutionism and race. His concept of “transformationism” represented a nuanced and moderated evolutionary theory; yet, in the latter part of his career, he acknowledged an overreliance on biological explanations in his earlier writings.

Methodologically, Tarde consistently privileged the historical approach over comparative analysis. This preference reflected his theoretical emphasis on dynamism and a relative disregard for collective social factors. A more robust engagement with comparative methodologies might have compelled greater recognition of certain systemic limitations within his framework. Tarde's enduring scholarly legacy can be discerned principally across three domains: criminology, social interaction theory, and diffusion processes. His criminological analyses have arguably attracted sustained scholarly attention, continuing to inspire hypotheses within contemporary criminological research.⁶⁰ At a time when disciplinary boundaries fostered mutual skepticism—psychologists adopting an anti-sociological stance, and sociologists an anti-psychological one—Tarde's insights into social interaction and its effects on individuals,

58 Ibid., pp. 391-392.

59 Davidovitch, A. (1961). Criminalité et répression en France depuis un siècle. *Revue Française de Sociologie*, 2(1), 30. Similar findings also in Davidovitch, A., & Boudon, R. (1964). Les mécanismes sociaux des abandons des poursuites. *L'Année Sociologique*, 15, iii.

60 Davidovitch, A. (1961). Criminalité et répression en France depuis un siècle. *Revue Française de Sociologie*, 2(1), 30.

groups, and society provided foundational perspectives that contributed significantly to the emergent field of social psychology. For instance, E. A. Ross explicitly credited Tarde with many foundational ideas articulated in his *Social Psychology*.⁶¹

Furthermore, Tarde's perceptive analysis of the multifaceted diffusion of innovations across diverse social systems yielded principles that remain salient for current scholars investigating diffusion phenomena.⁶² For specialists across the social sciences, engaging with Tarde's writings remains an intellectually enriching endeavor, demonstrating the intellectual agility that the French term *esprit d'athlète* aptly captures.

OVERVIEW OF CHAPTERS

In Chapter 01 of this book, Alain Alcouffe, Professor Emeritus at Université de Toulouse, discusses the 21st century rediscovery of Tarde's work mainly in sociology or other social studies, emphasizing the relevance of some of his ideas to current research in economic psychology and behavioral economics. In the second chapter, Georgios Arabatzis, Professor at the National, Kapodistrian University of Athens, examines the literary Byzantinism, arguing that moralism is completely separated from moral determinations and moral facts in a monadological universe. In Chapter 03, Frank, A. Coutelieris (Professor at University of Patras) and Antonis Kanavouras (Ministry of Education) present a mathematically proven approach to scientific field research, focusing on exploring the "mechanisms" of innovation. They propose the introduction of "new productive combinations", made possible by utilizing previous knowledge in a well-defined analytical-combinatorial way. In Chapter 04, Spyros Gangas of the Deree-The American College of Greece, is focusing on Tarde's homologies with Simmel. This proposed affinity is justified because Tarde's communicative cornucopia is not dissimilar to Simmel's proliferation of individuated spheres of life and secondly, because both Tarde and Simmel ground sociology on naturalistic templates. In the fifth chapter, Fani Giannousi, post doc researcher in the School of Political Sciences at the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, discusses how Tarde poses the problem of the constitution of values and norms, departing from the government of affects and highlights how this foregrounding of affect is currently used as a way to reanimate social and political theory and a tool explore pressing political problems.

In Chapter 06, Professor Panayotis Michaelides and Professor Kostas Theologou (National Technical University of Athens) show that the certain elaborations of Tarde may be traced throughout Joseph Schumpeter's works, since the French social philosopher and theoretician delivered a theory of Social Evolution based on Technological Change as its driving force, closely related to the profiteering function of the economy. In Chapter 07, Professor Kostas Theologou underlines the Laws of Imitation and invention as Tarde's most significant contribution to the linking between technology and society and claims that the core concepts of imitation, repetition, similitude of the masses are interwoven to foster wider social transformations, even promote new social Paradigms. In Chapter 08, Alexia Sofia Papazafeiropoulou, post-doc researcher at National Technical University of Athens, examines the commonalities of central arguments in Gabriel Tarde's work *Monadology and Sociology* with contemporary sociological analyses of Mobility. In the ninth chapter of the volume, Nikos Psarros, Prof. Dr. at Universität Leipzig, describes the philosophical significance of the monadological approach to ontology and presents some basic elements of the monadological tradition, which has its roots in the philosophies of Plato and Aristotle, and, building on the pillar of Spinozism and Leibniz's monadology, still exerts a great influence on modern philosophical discourse. In Chapter 10, Spyridon Stelios, Teaching and Research Associate at National Technical University of Athens, discusses the main *modus ponens* that underlines Tarde's *Monadology and*

61 Ross, E. A. (1908). *Social Psychology : An out-line and source book*. Macmillan.

62 Rogers, E. M. (1962). *Diffusion of innovations*. Free Press.

Sociology claim that if we observe any phenomenon, then we observe a society. Finally, in Chapter 11, Katerina Vassilikou, Director of Research at Research Centre for Greek Society of the Academy of Athens, argues that Tarde's work can be an inspiration for biographical analysis to understand recent migratory phenomena such as migrant networks, migrant-transnational family as well as the individual strategies of migrants.

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